

## Resumo

Neste artigo, pretende-se explorar como a terminologia estabelecida da história da arte influencia a prática da disciplina, determinando a interpretação de obras de arte específicas, assim como as áreas de estudo (particularmente quando se tratam questões relativas aos gêneros pictóricos e à definição de períodos estilísticos). Tomando como exemplo o quadro de Georges de La Tour *Um casal de camponeses a comer*, tentarei demonstrar que termos como ‘realismo’, ‘realista’, ‘naturalista’ etc. usados para a sua descrição e/ou interpretação, longe de constituir caracterizações estilísticas objetivas, moldam a nossa percepção da obra. Proponho também mostrar a utilidade da categoria analítica da classe social e mostrar como a distância social entre o pintor e o seu tema (neste caso, os camponeses) é incorporada no estilo e sentido do quadro, sendo fundamental para a compreensão da sua intencionalidade e função. ●

## Abstract

This paper aims to explore the ways in which standard art history terminology shapes the practice of art history by conditioning the interpretation of specific works of art and, in certain cases, the definition of a research subject (especially where questions of genre and periodization are concerned). Taking as a case study a painting by Georges de La Tour, the *Peasant Couple Eating*, I will argue that terms such as realism, realistic, naturalistic etc. used for its description and/or interpretation, far from constituting objective stylistic characterizations, shape our perception of the work in question. Bringing the question of social class to the center of the discourse on realism, I propose to show how the social divide between the painter and his subject matter (in this case, the peasants) is internalized in the painting’s style and meaning, and how it is fundamental for the understanding of its intentionality and function. ●

## palavras-chave

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METODOLOGIA  
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# THE NAMES OF THINGS: TERMINOLOGY AND THE PRACTICE OF ART HISTORY

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<sup>1</sup> As defined by Nochlin 1990, 13: “Preceded by Romanticism and followed by what is now generally termed Symbolism, it was the dominant movement from about 1840 until 1870-80. Its aim was to give a truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life”.

What’s in a name? Shakespeare might ask. Art historians should, too. The problem with art history terminology is that it has become so standard that it is hard to see it as constituting a methodological problem per se. But the use of stylistic or periodic characterisations such as romanticism, realism or neoclassicism is anything but straightforward, and many times creates more problems than the ones that it purports to resolve. No one of course thinks of these terms as analytical tools, and their usefulness seems to lay precisely on their perceived neutrality: an arsenal of common words, a craft vocabulary if you will, so that practitioners of art history can effectively communicate between themselves.

This paper will attempt to show how the use of a specific term, namely ‘realism’, ‘realist’, ‘realistic’ etc., brings a train of anachronistic associations, especially when applied to painting before the nineteenth century, that is, whenever used to describe a period, artist, work of art or genre, that antedates the genesis of Realism as a distinct (and historically defined) artistic movement.<sup>1</sup> It is not an effort to proclaim the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ usage of a specific term, but rather to draw attention to the fact that its very usage is tinged with ideological assumptions about the nature and function of painting (what painting does and how it does it), hence influencing the way that the art of the past (and especially that of the seventeenth century) is approached, studied and understood. Or, to put it in Keith Moxey’s words, “art historians inevitably look at the art of their own time in order to assess the visual history of the past. The importance of Realism as a European style in the middle of the nineteenth century, for example, affected the way in which they read the stylistic record of previous age” (Moxey, 1998, 31). The point that I am trying to make is not that art historical terminology is inadequate for the description of style and/or subject matter, but

that it actively shapes interpretation because of the way that it came into being. That is, mostly during the formative years of the discipline, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and undoubtedly influenced by the triumph of modernism and the avant-garde. A selective survey of some of the problems relating to the usage of the term 'realism' in an Italian, Dutch and French context will be necessary, before a tentative suggestion for the interpretation of La Tour's *Peasant Couple Eating* is made, that proposes the concept of 'class' as central in the realism debate.

## Realism and the problem of Caravaggio studies

In a now dated, but important monograph on Caravaggio, that collected for the first time and translated in English the early sources regarding the painter (Van Mander, Giustiniani, Mancini, Baglione, Scannelli, Bellori, Sandrart and Susinno, covering the period 1604-1724), Howard Hibbard rendered various expressions relating to imitation and nature using the word 'realism' or 'realist'.<sup>2</sup> For example, the phrase "ed è sommamente in istima per la forza dell'imitazione" in the original text of Caravaggio's *Vita* from Bellori's *Le vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni* (Rome, 1672), is translated as "...very highly esteemed for its powerful realism" (Hibbard 1983, 370)<sup>3</sup> or the phrase "venuto in tempo che, non essendo molto in uso il naturale" is rendered with "for he lived at a time when realism was not much in vogue" (Hibbard, 1983, 371). This is not meant to criticise Hibbard's choice of words,<sup>4</sup> but rather to show that the translation of the Italian sources starts from a preconceived notion about Caravaggio's style, one that it further solidifies, by rendering the coeval texts in a way that significantly alters their meaning.<sup>5</sup> Hibbard's influence should not be overlooked since scholars still use his translations for reference.<sup>6</sup>

But what does the term mean in the context of Caravaggio's painting? Does it refer to his pictorial technique,<sup>7</sup> subject matter or both? Phrases like "the insistent realism of his paintings challenged classicist ideals, which continued to dominate church and private patronage" (Richards, 2011, 53) seem to represent the norm in Caravaggio scholarship today (even though 'naturalism' is currently used more often as a literal description of his style). Realism as a challenge to what today is perceived as the more conventional (sometimes, even sentimental, a nineteenth-century prejudice that still lingers on) approach of the Roman and Bolognese schools, serves mostly to underline the originality and uniqueness of Caravaggio's style. Combined with the fetishisation of biography that accompanies a great deal of Caravaggio scholarship, as Richard Spear (2010) recently remarked,<sup>8</sup> notions concerning Caravaggio's realism (regardless of the theatrical aspects of his painting<sup>9</sup> or his debt to the classical compositions of Raphael and Michelangelo) help sustain the narrative of the pioneer, rebellious artist who broke away from the conventions of religious and

<sup>2</sup> The entire translation of Caravaggio's *Vita* can be found in Hibbard, 1983, 360-374.

<sup>3</sup> The passage refers to the painting *The Raising of Lazarus* (1608-09, oil on canvas, 380 x 275 cm, Museo Nazionale, Messina).

<sup>4</sup> The recent English edition of Bellori (2005, 183-184) renders the respective passages as follows: "and it is held in the highest esteem for the power of the imitation" and "coming at a time when working from nature was not much in fashion".

<sup>5</sup> It is important to observe, however, that Hibbard did not wholly subscribe to the view about Caravaggio's realism, which he took nevertheless as a given. In the Afterthoughts of his book, he wrote that Caravaggio "was not a true genre painter, and he never painted what he actually saw in the street, piazza, or tavern. His settings are minimal, his anatomy is suspect, and the realistic surfaces of his figures often clothe attitudes and gestures derived from older, idealizing compositions that he was compelled to emulate" (1983, 256).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Christopher Etheridge (2011, 174-177), who uses Hibbard's translations of Mancini and Bellori.

<sup>7</sup> There have been efforts to describe the novelty of Caravaggio's technique while avoiding the term, such as Christiansen, 1986, 421-445, who uses the evidence provided by imaging methods to analyze the incisions in some of his canvases as a sort of compositional guide. Christiansen argues that Caravaggio did not use preparatory drawings for his compositions and reserves the term "realistic" to refer only to "painting from actual models", as opposed to "the artifice of an evidently predetermined composition" (423). Christiansen observes that this method was revolutionary precisely because of the manner of preparation for the overall composition and not necessarily because of the "realistic effects which were the source of so much scandal" (433).

<sup>8</sup> An example of this type of interpretation, influenced by what one would call the "personality cult", is evident in one of the recent exhibition

catalogues about the painter. See Strinati, 2010, pp. 21, 22: “Il Caravaggio attrae perché si sente che la sua vita e la sua opera sono strettamente e quasi necessariamente connesse” and “... la sua opera è in ogni caso una transposizione nell’opera figurativa del piano esistenziale personale”.

<sup>9</sup> Scholars who have remarked the theatrical poses of his early genre pictures such as the *Card-sharps* or the *Fortune Teller*, stress the fact that they do not constitute the imitation of actual scenes, but an imaginative recreation, often testifying to the influence of rogue and picaresque literature. See especially Helen Langdon (2001, 44-65), and, more recently, Christopher Etheridge (2011, 156-177) and Nancy E. Edwards (2011, 180-209).

<sup>10</sup> Realism and the Carracci is another complicated issue. Walter Friedlaender (1974, 77) observed that Annibale’s realism in some of his early drawings was not transferred per se in his paintings, but rather served as a means for creating a more convincing idealism. A. W. A. Boschloo (1974, 33-34), on the other hand, describes Annibale’s realism in nineteenth-century terms, claiming that the *Bean Eater* (ca. 1583-1585, Galleria Colonna) is the “unembellished portrait of a man” that Annibale portrays with “no less sympathy than members of the fashionable circles” and drawing attention to the “matter-of-factness” with which the man is represented and to the fact that the “spectator... is suddenly confronted by the painter with a fragment of reality”. To this, compare Michael Fried’s (2010, 145) ingenuous observation that the painting (which he also deems to be “realistic”) registers the painter’s “active bodily presence at the scene of representation”.

secular iconography, and at the same time tie him directly to his nineteenth-century ‘descendants’ – most notably, Courbet – and assert his dominant position in a lineage that ultimately led to the triumph of modernity.

Furthermore, ‘realism’ plays an important part in the study and appreciation of the Lombard tradition of painting, as its most prominent characteristic, the one that sets it apart from the other Italian schools, and the one that helped prepare the painting of Caravaggio and the Carracci family as well.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition catalogue *Painters of Reality* (2004) is a case in point. The exhibition revisits the exhibition *I pittori della realtà* in Lombardia (Milan 1953), organised by Roberto Longhi, Renata Cipriani and Giovanni Testori, itself influenced by the celebrated French exhibition *Les peintres de la réalité* (1934, reorganised in 2006, to be discussed in detail below). Realism is used throughout, along with naturalism, to indicate chiefly the style of the paintings exhibited and not so much their subject matter, since it deals with portraiture and religious painting as well. Realism is also opposed to the “artificial appearance of Mannerist art... and later the theatrical rhetoric of the Baroque”, the expression that Philippe de Montebello, then director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, uses in his “Director’s Foreword” in order to describe the enterprise undertaken by Roberto Longhi in the early 1950s (2004, vii). It is impossible to escape the negative undertones that words such as “artificial”, “theatrical” and “rhetoric” carry for modern audiences, while realism is presented, by contrast, as a radical – and essentially modern – alternative. Furthermore, in both cases (the Italian and the French), the “painters of reality” are opposed to what is considered to be the dominant style or artistic tradition (in French historiography of art, it is contrasted with classicism), in an effort to reevaluate the outlook of the pictorial production of each period and region. Things get more complicated when one advances from the genre scenes of the Campi family and Bartolomeo Passarotti (1529-1592) to a painter like Giacomo Ceruti (1698-1767). Identifying any local or regional school with one style or artistic tradition through time can be highly problematic for a number of reasons, but in this case one of the basic problems plaguing the use of the term is made apparent. Were the peasants, beggars, dwarfs etc. that Ceruti painted in the first half of the eighteenth century the same as the people that the Campi or Passarotti painted in the last decades of the sixteenth? Didn’t attitudes toward the poor, urban workers and charity, among others, change at all in the span of two centuries? The problem with the term realism is precisely that it implies the existence of a reality that is as accessible to a contemporary viewer as it was accessible to the painter two or four centuries ago. The point is not simply to situate each painting historically and to determine to which point it represents a reality (either objectively observed by the painter or embellished with comic, moralistic or other elements). The crux lays in trying to recreate the ways that these realities were perceived by the painter and his or her audiences, and the ways that the paintings themselves had something to say about these realities, instead of passively reflecting a given fact. Thus, while rightfully singling out a tendency in northern Italian painters, namely a predilection to a certain kind of subject matter and a greater attention to detail than their

central or southern Italian counterparts, lumping together the genre scenes of Pas-sarotti and Ceruti, for example, with the argument that they share certain stylistic traits will not provide any clear insight into their work regarding its meaning and/or possible function(s).

It is no accident that in his essay “The Painters of Reality: Art in Bergamo and Brescia after the Age of Caravaggio”, where Ceruti is examined among other painters, Enrico de Pascale uses a number of adjectives to qualify the term, although he confines himself to stylistic observations, adjectives that all serve to underline the notion that Ceruti’s realism was essentially the same as Courbet’s realism a century later: “starkly realistic”, “aggressively realistic”, “sharp, crude realism”, while remarking: “His sincerity and moral commitment are equaled only in the ‘Lombard’ side of Caravaggio’s work, in the paintings of the Le Nains and La Tour, and indeed in the works of Gustave Courbet, the father of modern realism” (Pascale, 2004, 218, 219, 228, 231). Furthermore, the view that comic and satirical elements are incompatible with ‘true’ realism, reveals a subtle devaluation of genre painting (which I consider a common bias of French and Italian art history in particular) and how much our notion of realism is conditioned by its nineteenth-century connotations.<sup>11</sup>

## “Realism reconsidered” and Dutch Art Historiography

Perhaps the most fruitful exploration of the limits and limitations of the term ‘realism’ has been conducted by art historians dealing with Dutch seventeenth-century art. In a volume fittingly entitled *Realism reconsidered* (1997), a number of texts were reunited (or commissioned) with the purpose of shedding light to different interpretive approaches concerning the notion of “realism” and its usefulness, applicability and meaning when it comes to the study of seventeenth-century Dutch painting.<sup>12</sup> For many years Dutch art historiography was dominated by the iconological method, propounded by Eddy de Jongh and his school, whereby realism as such was a nineteenth-century invention and that Dutch painting of the seventeenth century was never meant as mirrored reflection of reality but rather concealed a number of hidden meanings with moralistic and didactic content. De Jongh used the term “seeming” or “apparent” realism in order to differentiate between what was essentially a separation of content and form and he relied heavily on textual information, especially on books of emblems.<sup>13</sup>

The main challenge to de Jongh’s dominant method came via the United States and Svetlana Alpers’ highly polemical book *The Art of Describing* (1983). The starting point of Alpers’ argument was that iconology dealt with Dutch painting with the aid of methodological tools developed expressly for the study of Italian classical (Renaissance) art.<sup>14</sup> This is, despite its shortcomings, the chief merit of her book.

<sup>11</sup> Pascale, 2004, 218: “The often considerable size of Ceruti’s paintings of such subjects and their starkly realistic style propel them well beyond the narrow confines of so-called genre painting. Indeed, Ceruti stands in direct contrast to the latter, which was often allegorical and comical in intent, a vehicle for implied moralizing or double entendres...Ceruti’s moving works present an afflicted but dignified humanity, wretched but self-aware, an unforgettable gallery of men and women, old and young, caught on the side of a road, in the corner of a piazza, or within destitute domestic interiors: “‘Portraits’, in a word, of a common, unhappy mankind...”. The quotation is from Longhi’s preface of the 1953 exhibition catalogue.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. de Vries, 1991, 209–244. For an overview of recent literature, see Westermann, 2002, 356–359.

<sup>13</sup> De Jongh, 1997, p. 21: “Pausing to consider this much discussed term, however, it should be remembered that in the seventeenth century instances of actual realism coincided with others more appropriately described as expressing a ‘seeming realism’, and that this phenomenon is based on a mentality which can be partly reconstructed. For the purpose of this article, realism is defined as meaning the ‘reflection of reality’. Seeming realism, on the other hand, refers to representations which, although they imitate reality in terms of form, simultaneously convey a realized abstraction” (first published in 1971).

<sup>14</sup> Alpers, 1983, xvii–xxvii.

<sup>15</sup> See especially Alpers, 1983, xix: “To a remarkable extent the study of art and its history has been determined by the art of Italy and its study... Italian art and the rhetorical evocation of it has not only defined the practice of the central tradition of Western artists, it has also determined the study of their works...”. This problematization of art history as an enterprise developed mainly in artistic centers is especially interesting, although Alpers does not go into questions concerning artistic geography or the relationship between centers and peripheries.

<sup>16</sup> Sluijter, 1997, 87: “The limitations that this approach [i.e. the iconological] can place on interpretation also result from the separation between form and content and, related to this, the curious distinction between meaning and meaninglessness”.

<sup>17</sup> Hecht, 1986, 173–176, among others, comments on the degree that eighteenth and nineteenth-century views towards realism have conditioned the study and interpretation of seventeenth-century Dutch art.

<sup>18</sup> Alpers, 1975–76, 115–144. See also Miedema, 1977, 205–219; Alpers, 1978–79, 46–50; Vandenbroeck, 1984, 79–124 and Gibson, 1992, 29–39.

<sup>19</sup> Alpers, 1975–1976, 119. See also p. 136: “Though the revolutionary sympathy for the peasant that we find in a Courbet was impossible at this time, the bond of human sympathy framed in laughter at our common human lot was not. When I speak of the peasant as comic, I mean that he is the source of an essentially comic understanding of the world on our part”.

<sup>20</sup> Miedema, 1977, 216, observes that the “comic mode” that Alpers is talking about refers essentially to subject matter and not to realistic depiction. Alpers remarked on the importance of the “descriptive treatment of individual figures” (1975–76, 137) as a means to disassociate viewer from subject, especially when the emphasis was laid on its “ugliness” and “lowness”.

<sup>21</sup> Alpers (1978–79, 47) stressed again her rightful rejection of the notion of the peasant as an

That it drew attention to the methodology that art historians take for granted while employing it in order to study the art of any given period, and how methodology itself shapes, to a large extent, the formulation and interpretation of the subject.<sup>15</sup> These two approaches – by no means the only ones – are indicative of the problems and limitations of using the term “realism”. Having to work with it, de Jongh and Alpers chose the opposite sides of an artificial divide between form and content, or to use Eric Sluijter’s fortuitous expression, “between meaning and meaninglessness”.<sup>16</sup> Sluijter refers only to de Jongh and the iconological method, but I believe that his comments apply also to Alpers (who went to the other extreme in her effort to account for the distinctive nature of seventeenth-century Dutch painting) and to the problem of realism as such, since the impulse behind de Jongh’s iconological approach in the first place seems to have been a desire to disassociate seventeenth-century Dutch painting from later assumptions about it,<sup>17</sup> as well as an attempt to discover in it the more literary virtues traditionally associated with Italian painting.

What is of interest here though is an earlier article by Svetlana Alpers, called “Realism as a Comic Mode” and the debate that ensued after its publication.<sup>18</sup> In it, Alpers argued for an interpretation of realism, especially in peasant scenes depicting *kermissis*, as a preeminently comic mode, that is, as a kind of painting that aimed to make the viewer laugh, but in a festive, non-mocking way, that stressed the “community of human pleasures” and that was devoid of moralistic content and/or intent.<sup>19</sup> This view was – somewhat harshly – criticised by Miedema in his reply to Alpers’ article who deemed it anachronistic and stressed the fact that excessive laughter itself was probably censured as foolish behaviour (Miedema, 1977, 210–211).

More importantly, Alpers remarked on the relevance of the “social distinction” between viewer and subject matter for the understanding of these paintings’ appeal, as opposed to the over-reliance on their “deeper hidden meanings” (1975–76, 136–137). She also argued that “artistic conventions [were] engaged in complex ways with social realities” and that the “artistic manifestation of certain attitudes toward the peasant” should be investigated along with the “civic and economic situation of the peasant at this time” (1975–76, 138). I believe that Alpers’ valuable suggestion about social distinction and difference is indeed crucial for the understanding of these – and similar – paintings, although I do not agree with the specific nature of laughter she claims they provoked. This was rather a socially conditioned laughter where the socially (and not simply morally) superior laughed with the socially inferior. This is stressed by the grotesque and often deformed facial features of the villagers represented, features that in no way could be deemed “realistic”.<sup>20</sup> And there was indeed a moral to be drawn from them, contrary to Alpers’ suggestion, although this moral had a distinctly social resonance (instead of ethical or theological connotations, that are widely assumed when the term “moralistic” is used and considered to apply universally)<sup>21</sup>: classes should not mingle, everyone should keep their respective places (just as nature and God have ordered) and engaging in the kind of behaviour that peasants do, will debase one out of their social standing



and rank.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the paintings served to delineate social identity on the reverse: not only peasant is as peasant does, but also, he who abstains from this kind of behaviour is clearly not a peasant, something that would serve to strengthen the sense of social position and identity of the intended audiences of these works that clearly excluded the peasants themselves from their consumption.

This point was especially well laid out in two excellent articles: The first by Keith Moxey,<sup>23</sup> examining the woodcut *Large Peasant Holiday*, executed in 1535 by Sebald Beham (1500-1550), and the second by Paul Vandenbroeck, which treats a series of paintings depicting peasant weddings, attributed to the studio of the Verbeeck family (active in Mechelen, sixteenth-century). Moxey argues that “such laughter [ie. the one provoked by Beham’s woodcut] served the purpose of venting middle class Lutheran hostility against a portion of society that had proved dangerous to the survival of its newly won faith” and that the “mockery and disdain to which the figure of the peasant was subjected...was given new life in the sixteenth-century as part of an attempt to reassert the validity of social hierarchy in the wake of the Reformation” (Moxey, 1981-82, 128, 130).<sup>24</sup> Vandenbroeck argues convincingly about the function of these themes as a class satire directed against the peasants, that served to legitimise social hierarchy and to distance the lower and middle classes from them. In addition, he makes the valid point that Alpers’ and Miedema’s theses are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that the works in question could be simultaneously informed by different ideological contexts. His interpretation does not reject either the moralistic content of these paintings (tied closely to the social) or the fact that these “comic scenes [were] designed to cause mirth” (Vandenbroeck, 1984, 79, 119). It is interesting that an article written later on, by Walter Gibson, presents not so much a refutation of some of the hypotheses (regarding iconography) that Vandenbroeck advanced as a different methodological approach, as one concluding remark reveals: “Verbeeck’s grotesque wedding feasts, replete with bizarre figures and incongruous objects and activities, were intended in some way to hold up a mirror to the folly of all men, irrespective of their social class or calling in life” (Gibson, 1992, 39). The emphasis here is on “irrespective”, serving to stress the universal nature of this type of allegory. But this is surely an issue that runs much deeper.

embodiment of sin, in her reply to Miedema’s article, which provides an excellent, if aggressive, account of what are essentially two different methodological approaches to the study of the history of art.

<sup>22</sup> Alpers, 1975-1976, 128-130, argues, on the contrary, that participation in the *kermis* by non-peasant outsiders had an actual and not just artistic dimension and that it was not necessarily frowned upon, although she admits that non-peasant participants are rarely depicted indulging in the kind of deregulated behavior that the peasants exhibit. As it happens, the Hans Bol *Kermis* painting that she is discussing, is a prime example of how social difference was performed in these paintings. In it, the representatives of the social group to whom these types of works were clearly addressed, or meant to appeal to, are depicted on a separate plane, with rigid poses, and not interacting with the peasants (Fig. 6, p. 130).

<sup>23</sup> Moxey, 1981-82, 107-130. Although Moxey’s article deals with a Nuremberg artist, his work falls directly under the tradition of peasant iconography discussed here.

<sup>24</sup> Moxey also observed that “we who have been trained not to laugh at those less fortunate than ourselves, not to disdain poverty, or notice deformities, not to enjoy vulgar and obscene forms of language find it difficult to appreciate a brand of humour that invites us to do just these things”, touching upon the very important point of how modern audiences relate (or fail to relate) to this type of works.

<sup>25</sup> The exhibition was revisited in 2006. See *Orangerie, 1934: Les “peintres de la réalité”*, ed. Pierre Georgel, Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2006.

## ***Les peintres de la réalité* and French Art Historiography**

French historiography of art is one of the most fruitful fields for the exploration of the ideological usage of the terms realism and reality. I will concentrate on the exhibition *Les peintres de la réalité* of 1934-35,<sup>25</sup> that attempted to redefine the – then dominant – view of the French seventeenth-century as the ‘classical’ century, by rehabilitating a part of a neglected pictorial tradition that it sought to identify with

<sup>26</sup> Thus, Paul Jamot could write in his Preface (*Peintres*, 1934, XVI) that “c’est un des principaux titres de la France que de les avoir enfantés [les peintres de la réalité] et qu’ils n’ont pas d’équivalent chez les autres nations”.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, the recent collection of essays by Jean-Pierre Cuzin, tellingly entitled *Figures de la réalité. Caravagesques français, Georges de La Tour, les frères Le Nain...*, Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> The disparity of the paintings assembled was remarked upon at the time. See the exhibition review by Lord, 1935, 138-141. The 2006 exhibition, despite its revisionist angle, implicitly accepts many of the assumptions of the 1934 catalogue, and more importantly the criteria behind the original selection of the paintings. See the exhibition review by Langdon, 2007, 277-278.

<sup>29</sup> This was also the period of the “retour à l’ordre” in plastic arts, characterized by a renewed interest in representation, and a rejection of abstraction. See the exhibition catalogue *Les Réalismes 1919-1939*, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980.

<sup>30</sup> For the ideological context of the exhibition, see Vlachou, 2009, 127-138. See also Golan, 1995, 38-39, who discusses the “ideological amendments” the Le Nain brothers had to undergo “in order to fit the twenties naturalist model. Eradicated in this new appraisal of the brothers were the Left-wing political implications of their previous revival instigated by Champfleury in *Les Peintres de la réalité sous Louis XIII* back in 1862”. Compare the case of Gustave Courbet himself in Nochlin, 1982, 64-78.

<sup>31</sup> It is no accident that phrases such as “ces œuvres se montrent aussi françaises que celles des classiques” were used by Sterling in his assessment of the exhibition’s impact (Sterling, 1935, 25), or the fact that Sterling insisted on those formal traits that established the Frenchness of the works exhibited and distinguished them from similarly themed works from other schools (especially the Netherlandish school).

realism, considered a French style par excellence.<sup>26</sup> The term itself was cautiously avoided in the title of the exhibition for a number of reasons, but it informed its general outlook, especially in what concerns the perceived objectivity of this kind of painting and its universalist appeal. As Paul Jamot remarked in the Preface of the exhibition catalogue, the painters of reality “se tiennent tout près de la nature et, sur des sujets qu’ailleurs on dédaigne ou que l’on traite tout différemment, dans un esprit de raillerie, de charge ou de déclamation, ils disent des choses toutes simples dont l’originalité ne frappe guère d’abord...sans parti pris, sans compromis, dans ce sentiment de sympathie qui unit les hommes” (*Peintres*, 1934, XVI, my emphasis). The exhibition served to shape a novel view of a part of seventeenth-century painting as ‘realistic’ (a view that subsequently turned into one of the main narratives of French art historiography),<sup>27</sup> and determined to a large degree the reception of La Tour’s painting for which it provided a comprehensive conceptual and stylistic background. The Orangerie exhibition presented, for the very first time, a number of stylistically and thematically heterogeneous paintings,<sup>28</sup> organised initially around the Le Nain brothers, as an alternative to seventeenth-century French classicism. The criteria for the selection of the works depended on abstract, ethical principles, due mainly to the fact that the organizers of the exhibition, while trying to appropriate the realist tradition, also sought to distance themselves from contemporary discussions about realism and socialism.<sup>29</sup> This is what Paul Jamot was probably hinting at when he tried to justify the title of the exhibition (deriving from Champfleury’s 1862 book on the brothers Le Nain): “Pourquoi ont dit certains, ne pas se contenter du nom de réalistes? Il me parut à la fois trop précis, trop limité et trop doctrinal” (Jamot, 1935, 69).

The main achievement of the exhibition though, that promoted a classicist and politically conservative reading of ‘realism’,<sup>30</sup> was that this group of paintings was presented as an integral part of the French national school of painting, and as the missing link in the historiographic and stylistic chain that united the French primitifs (rediscovered in the beginning of the century) with the realism of Chardin, Corot and Manet (Courbet was conveniently left out because of his progressive politics). The exhibition served to stress the continuity of the French school through time, reestablishing a temporal and geographic continuum.<sup>31</sup>

## Georges de La Tour’s *Peasant Couple Eating*: A Tentative Suggestion

All these issues converge in particular in French (and sometimes not exclusively French) art historiography concerning the work of Georges de La Tour, especially his ‘realistic’ genre scenes. I will use the painting known as *Peasant Couple Eating* (c. 1622/25, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 90.8 cm., Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, fig. 1), to



demonstrate some of the problems created by the assumption that it is realistic, because of its subject matter (it represents a poor couple) and its style (a painterly treatment that insists on the rendering of surfaces and textures with a high degree of verisimilitude).

When the painting was published in 1975, Ferdinando Bologna observed that “the most important fact to bear in mind is that in the newly discovered painting the treatment of the iconographic theme is not characterized either by emphasis on the caricatural or grotesque aspect (which is the case with the Carracci *Bean Eater*), nor by a condescending attitude... There can be no doubt that for La Tour at this moment, far more important was the existential reality of the two old people eating (all the more so since he went out to find them in the social class of the disinherited...), than the fact that he wished to make any moral point out of them” (Bologna, 1975, 440). Bologna also goes on to comment on the “social intentions which La Tour eagerly pursued during his youth, and which in the work here illustrated are defined in their purest form”.<sup>32</sup> Although Bologna does not actually use the term realism, the idea that the painting is devoid of moralistic content and/or caricatural aspects stems from a nineteenth-century notion of realism. It also reveals a common tendency to project the meditative quality of La Tour’s later religious scenes illuminated with artificial candlelight to his so-called ‘daylight’ paintings, in an effort to reduce their glaring differences (stylistic and otherwise), according to an ideal of the unity of the work of the (male) artist, that still dominates traditional French art historiography, especially where it concerns canonical artists, such as La Tour.<sup>33</sup> Bologna’s interpretation of the painting as essentially a non-condescending, objective description of poverty hasn’t changed much since he wrote his article. In the 1997 exhibition catalogue, Jean-Pierre Cuzin remarked that “nous nous trouvons ici [ie. in front of the painting] devant la description simple et crue du malheur des pauvres gens” and further on: “le thème populaire du mangeur... est traité ici de manière singulièrement dépouillée, objective. Clinique, oserait-on dire” (Cuzin, 1997, 112). Cuzin also avoids the term “realism” (perhaps following the logic of the *Les peintres de la réalité*), but his interpretation is heavily indebted to it.

More misguided still are the attempts to associate the *Couple* with an early seventeenth-century print of a couple praying before they eat.<sup>34</sup> As Panayota Klagka has astutely observed, religious representations that include food (such as the Last Supper) never depict any of the figures in the actual act of eating.<sup>35</sup> On the contrary, eating – especially with the mouth open and the teeth showing – meant that the scene depicted, was most likely not a scene that had any kind of religious content.<sup>36</sup> It is clear that the couple praying, under the presence of the Holy Spirit, in Visscher’s print cannot have anything to do with La Tour’s painting. Although it might be shocking, especially to modern sensibilities, to suggest that the apparently grave in tone painting that depicts two destitute people eating could be humorous in any way, it is not unthinkable that the depiction of eating with the mouth open and using one’s hands could have humorous undertones. Although the painting lacks the overtly mocking tone and excessive imagery of Verbeeck’s

The importance of this ideological formulation was immediately apparent at the time. See for example Germain Bazin, “Au musée de l’Orangerie: la réalité française au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle”, *L’Amour de l’art* 1 (January 1935): 31–34 (repr. in *Orangerie, 1934*, 2006, 361–362).

<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to imagine just what those “social intentions” could be, given the fact that La Tour never appeared to be particularly sympathetic towards the poor. See the published documents in Thuillier, 1992, 251, 269, although Thuillier consistently tried to mitigate the impression that these documents created.

<sup>33</sup> Sterling, 1935, 34, was remarking that the differences in the twelve paintings by La Tour in the *Peintres de la réalité* exhibition were “purement superficielles et que la profonde logique d’un style personnel et vivant unit ces oeuvres”.

<sup>34</sup> The comparison was first made by Slatkes, 1996, 205, fig. 4. Cf. Bologna, 1975, 437, who was the first to propose the theological connection: “...a single episode is depicted, reduced to its simplest terms, the [its] significance [...] resides in the solidarity of the two characters who take part in it, binding them together as though they were involved in the rites and ceremonies of prayer”.

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Panayota Klagka for sharing with me some of her observations and conclusions that she reached during her research for her Ph.D. on Annibale Carracci’s genre scenes.

<sup>36</sup> For a notable medieval exception, see Jacqueline E. Jung, “Peasant Meal or Lord’s Feast? The Social Iconography of the Naumburg Last Supper”, *Gesta* 42 (2003): 39–61.



Georges de La Tour, *Peasant Couple Eating*, 1620/1625, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 90.8, © Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Photo: Jörg P. Anders.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, the short article by Ribault, 1984, 1-4, who, departing from the historical reality of the blind musicians such as the ones that people some of La Tour's genre scenes, concludes that his subject matter was "incontestablement pris dans la réalité et représenté comme tel", and goes on to comment on the severe and meditative nature of La Tour's work.

peasant weddings or Beham's peasant church feasts, it could, nevertheless, function on a similar level, that is, by asserting the viewer's social superiority and reinforce his/her sense of identity.

The title of the painting is also a problem. It is called simply *Les Mangeurs de pois* in French and *Peasant Couple Eating* in English (and the same in German, *Erbesen essendes Bauernpaar*). The descriptive French title strikes one as being more neutral, but it reveals precisely the bias of this approach: these are not simply people eating. These are people that belong to a specific social group, although this does not mean that it was a necessarily homogeneous group. The problem is more apparent in the English – and German – title. It is not at all certain that the people in the painting are peasants and not beggars, a term that has not been used in the literature regarding this work, as far as I've been able to ascertain. Beggars and social attitudes towards them could raise a whole range of issues about the work's interpretation. But these social attitudes, as well as social reality itself, are not to be deduced from the painting, as if the latter was a mirror held in front of it.<sup>37</sup> This is where social history of art could be useful. In his first chapter "On the Social History of Art" of his 1973 *Image of the People*, T. J. Clark asked a very pertinent

question about what enabled a painter to see – and what, on the contrary, prevented representation – to conclude with a revealing remark: “So the problem of schema and pictorial tradition is rather altered. The question becomes: in order to see certain things, what should we believe about them?” (Clark, 1999, 15–16).<sup>38</sup> To put it in other words, the fact that (a) reality exists, does not automatically make it available for representation. To give an unrelated example of how this works, it suffices to think of the lack of an indigenous tradition of landscape painting in the Iberian Peninsula before the nineteenth century and the proliferation of landscape painters during the nineteenth century especially in Portugal. Social and historical change and the access to a different set of pictorial conventions enabled painters to “see” the landscape of their own countries, particularly after having studied abroad.

In a similar fashion, one has to think about what enabled La Tour to see these beggars, peasants, blind musicians etc., and what he believed in order to be able to see them as he did. The concept of class could prove useful here. I would propose to think of both style and subject matter in terms of the social difference they incorporate. As far as style is concerned, the heightened – if slightly mannered – verisimilitude of the painting forces the socially (if not physically) distant subject matter into sharp focus, thus allowing for a level of scrutiny that objectifies it, that makes it available for inspection. As far as the subject matter is concerned, social difference is performed in a number of ways, but most significantly, in what concerns food and its consumption. In a recent article, Sheila McTighe has ingenuously associated the display of food in a series of paintings by the Campi family and by Bartolomeo Passarotti, as well as the consumption of food, with a contemporary treatise that assigned food groups to specific social groups.<sup>39</sup> This could provide a key to the understanding of La Tour’s painting, as the author herself suggests (McTighe, 2004, 321). Other studies further elaborate this association, such as Ken Albala’s book *Eating Right in the Renaissance*. In a chapter, entitled “Food and Class” Albala (2002, 184–217), argues that “in the sixteenth century it was the widening gulf between rich and poor rather than social equality that prompted the evolution of food symbolism” and that “a food ethic distinct from both lower and upper class eating habits” developed during the period. Thus, the iconography of La Tour’s painting could have both a descriptive and a proscriptive value for its viewers. They could observe how the peasants/beggars eat and behave, and what they eat, and then abstain from imitating their behavior. McTighe also observed that the purpose of Campi’s paintings “was to map the supposed fixity of a social hierarchy onto the fixity of a natural order” (2004, 312).<sup>40</sup> To paraphrase that, I would say that La Tour’s painting keeps the peasants/beggars in their place, while making it seem natural.

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The idea thus is not to discard the term but to be more attentive of the ways that its use informs our interpretations of specific works of art. Realism creates the false impression of an unmediated relationship between viewer and reality, painter

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most succinct definition of what social history of art does, is found in Clark, 1999, 13: “The point is this: the encounter with history and its specific determinations is made by the artist himself. The social history of art sets out to discover the general nature of the structures that he encounters willy-nilly; but it also wants to locate the specific conditions of one such meeting”.

<sup>39</sup> McTighe, 2004, 301–313. The treatise was Bartolomeo Pisanelli’s *Trattato della natura de’ cibi et del bere* (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1589).

<sup>40</sup> See also Mc Tighe, 2004, 303: “What these paintings naturalized, however, was a highly artificial, new, and troubling social order”.

and subject matter, viewer and painting. In this way, it serves to obscure the social distance between painter, viewer and subject matter that the painting strives to establish and ends up by suggesting that this distance is natural. This is a fundamentally ideological problem and it is precisely why keeping in mind the concept of class can help us better understand these extraordinary works, as well as acquire a deeper sense of our position towards them. ●

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